DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 101 PS 021 657

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TITLE Responsibility for Homework: Children's Ideas about Self-Regulation.
SPONS AGENCY Macquarie Univ., Sydney (Australia).
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (60th, New Orleans, LA, March 25-28, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; Cognitive Development; *Educational Testing; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; Foreign Countries; *Homework; Intentional Learning; Learning Motivation; Self Control; *Self Motivation; *Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior
IDENTIFIERS Australia (Sydney)

ABSTRACT

This study investigated children's practices and ideas or perceptions about self-regulation for two particular aspects of schoolwork: completing homework and learning for a class test. Subjects were 86 Anglo children (ages 7, 9, and 11) who were interviewed about their practices and ideas concerning homework completion and test preparation. Results revealed few age differences in practices. However, an age-related shift in ideas was found, from other-regulation in 7-year-old students to self-regulation in 11-year-old students. This finding provided some evidence of a broad developmental progression in children's understanding of both the purpose of learning and their responsibility for homework. No gender differences were found on any of the issues under consideration. (MM)

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ED 361 101

Responsibility for homework: Children's ideas about self-regulation

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Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development,
New Orleans, March 1993

The research was supported by a Macquarie University Research Grant to the author.

PS 021657

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Abstract

Responsibility, it has been argued, can be usefully studied if it is defined in terms of specific principles, such as self-regulation. This study investigated children's practices and ideas about self-regulation for two particular aspects of schoolwork, namely, completing homework and learning for a class test. The material presented was from a sample of 86 Anglo children (30 7-year-olds, 26 9-year-olds, 30 11-year-olds). Children were interviewed individually, asked about practices and given vignettes which tapped ideas about self-regulation. Results indicated few age differences in practices, but an age-related shift in ideas, from other- regulation (7-year-olds) to self-regulation (11-year-olds). Findings are discussed in terms of the link between responsible practice and the development of understanding of the implications of self-regulation.

Rationale

Within the context of a classroom, students are frequently described as behaving, (or not behaving) responsibly. Responsibility, however, involves more than a behavioral response. In order to be truly responsible children need to display some understanding of the cognitive components of responsibility as well as to behave appropriately (Anderson & Prawat, 1983). The present study focuses on children's understanding of responsibility as it is applied to practical school-based tasks such as completing homework.

Because the term 'responsibility' has been used in a variety of ways to describe a number of related, but complex issues, it has been argued that children's understanding of responsibility can be most usefully studied if responsibility is defined in terms of specific principles (Warton & Goodnow, 1991). One such principle most relevant for school-based tasks is that of self-regulation. For many school tasks, self-regulation involves understanding that reminders to complete the task should not be necessary, because the individual is accountable for what he or she does and for the learning that does or does not accrue. It also involves understanding that individuals are responsible for their own learning and that others cannot take over that task for them.

Research Questions

a) What practices do children report in regard to homework and learning for tests?

b) What understandings do children display about being responsible for homework?

c) Do these practices and understandings vary as a function of the age or gender of the child?

Method

Sample: The 86 participants were from a middle class suburb of Sydney, Australia. There were approximately equal numbers of boys and girls at each grade level. All children spoke English as their first language, although 14 came from homes where a second language (in 9 cases an Asian language, in 5 cases a European language) was also used by parents. Children were selected from at least 3 different classes at each grade level.

Sample characteristics

Grade level	Mean Age	Number	
		Boys	Girls
2	7 yrs 6 months	14	16
4	9 yrs 8 months	13	13
6	11 yrs 7 months	15	15

Procedure: Each child was interviewed for approximately 15 minutes by a female interviewer. The interview was in two sections: the first section asked about homework, the second asked about class tests.

To begin with, children were asked about *practices*. They were asked if they knew what homework was, whether they were given homework (and if so, what kind), where and when they completed it and whether they were reminded to complete it. They were asked two questions about being reminded: one asked about an indirect reminder, namely, "Do you have any homework?" and the other asked whether they were directly reminded by someone at home to do homework.

Children were then asked their *ideas* about homework. They were asked why they thought children were given homework, whether it was OK for children to be helped with their homework (and if so, how much), whether children should remember to do homework or be reminded (and why). Questions also addressed other aspects of self-regulation, such as whether homework should be completed if the teacher did not ever check it.

A similar set of questions was then asked about learning for class tests. Children were asked why they were given tests, whether they were reminded to study for tests (if so, by whom), whether they could ask for help during a test (what sort of assistance, and from whom) and whether they should remember to study or be reminded.

Results

Responses for questions were analysed for possible differences as a function of sex and grade level. Since there were no effects due to the sex of the child, results are presented in terms of grade levels.

1. *Practices*

Homework All children were familiar with the idea of homework, were given homework on a regular basis, and could describe the kinds of tasks they were given as homework. They usually completed homework before tea, and reported that, although they remembered to do homework without being reminded, they *were* usually reminded to do so by an adult (usually mother).

Tests All children were familiar with the practice of testing, although not all the grade 2 children displayed any clear understanding of the accepted conventions. Almost a third of these children said that it was OK to be helped by a friend or the teacher during a test and that they could ask for specific information e.g. 'I could ask what 30 and 30 is' (grade 2 boy)

Q: Are you reminded to do homework?

Most children (over 80% at each grade level) reported that they were given reminders about homework. There was some variation with grade level in the kind of reminders given: significantly fewer grade 6 children were given direct reminders about homework ($X^2(2) = 6.12$, $p < .05$) than younger children.

	Type of reminder	
	Direct	Indirect
Grade 2	80%	70%
Grade 4	69%	69%
Grade 6	50%	70%

2. *Ideas*

Several questions addressed children's ideas about homework and tests. For questions requiring coding of open-ended responses, inter-rater reliability averaged 91% and ranged from 82% to 100%.

Q: Why are children given homework?

Responses were coded into three categories:

(i) to learn; (ii) to revise, and (iii) other e.g. 'to stop the teacher repeating herself'.

Most common response:

Grade 2	to learn	(83%)
Grade 4	to learn	(77%)
Grade 6	to revise	(57%)

There was a significant difference ($X^2(4) = 37.96$, $p < .001$) between groups, with the two younger grades being more likely to describe the purpose of homework as "to learn".

Q: Why are children given tests?

Responses were coded into three categories:

(i) to learn (ii) For assessment e.g. 'to see what we can do' (iii) Other e.g.'helps in later life '

Most common response:

Grade 2	to learn	47%
Grade 4	assessment	73%
Grade 6	assessment	90%

There was a significant difference ($X^2(4) = 30.49$, $p < .001$) between grades, with a higher proportion of grade 2 children nominating learning as the purpose of tests than children in other grades.

Q: Should you remember or be reminded?

	Percentage saying "remember"	
	Homework	Tests
Grade 2	93%	57%
Grade 4	85%	88%
Grade 6	87%	97%

Significantly fewer grade 2 children considered you should remember about class tests than older children ($X^2(2) = 19.01$, $p < .001$). Since almost half the grade 2 children considered that they should be reminded about tests, their justifications for remembering for tests were not examined. Nevertheless, those older children who gave justifications for remembering both tests and homework appeared to give similar justifications in each situation.

Q: Why should you remember / be reminded about homework?

Responses were coded into three categories: (i) self-regulation e.g. 'It's my homework', 'it's my responsibility'; (ii) other-regulation e.g. 'So Mum doesn't get angry' and (iii) irrelevant or don't know

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Insert Fig 1 about here

Percentage "self-regulation" responses	
Grade 2	23%
Grade 4	35%
Grade 6	67%

Significantly more grade 6 children gave ownership responses than other grade levels ($\chi^2(2) = 12.12$, $p < .001$).

Discussion

There is some evidence of a broad developmental progression in children's understanding of both the purpose of learning and of their responsibility for homework. Young children seem to think that the purpose of both tests and homework is to learn: there is little comprehension of the process of consolidating learning by reviewing and assessing one's progress. This finding, for grade 2 and grade 4 children, is consistent with the limited understanding of the nature of tests that researchers such as Thorkildsen (1991) have described in such age groups. By grade 6, however, the majority of children are able to distinguish between learning and revision and assessment. There were no gender differences found on any of the issues under consideration.

In terms of the specific aspect of self-regulation of schoolwork which was investigated, namely, remembering to do homework, the developmental progression is

from a simple understanding of the rhetoric e.g. 'you should remember' to the understanding of a principle e.g. 'I should remember because the homework was given to me, not to my parents'. Grade 2 children (and grade 4 to a lesser extent) were concerned with possible negative outcomes - e.g. 'Mum might be angry'. Although this type of justification may indicate that the children are aware that others expect them to remember, it also shows that the children are implicitly justifying their action in terms of another person: it is other- rather than self-regulation. The developmental shift, therefore, is from explanations which restate the rhetoric ('I should remember') or explanations in terms of other-regulation ('I should remember because Mum might forget') to a principled response ('It is my homework so I am responsible for it').

When homework practices are examined, it appears that children are given reminders long after they demonstrate some understanding of the basic principle of self-regulation. Although two-thirds of the grade 6 children gave a justification for remembering in terms of self-regulation, these children reported that they were regularly reminded at home. It appears that, although they understand the principle, they are not always given the opportunity to follow through that understanding in everyday life. The practical difficulty, for parents and teachers, is to match the degree of support offered with the child's developing understanding. The reduced number of direct prompts which were offered to grade 6 children suggests that parents, in part at least, were beginning to match the memory support offered to the child's understanding. A clearer understanding of the developmental progression of children's understanding will help this matching process.

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